

**Statement of Chairman Henry J. Hyde
before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International
Operations**

“The Plight of Religious Minorities: Can Religious Pluralism Survive?”

**2172 Rayburn House Office Building
Friday, June 30, 2006**

Chairman Smith and Members of the Subcommittee,

I want to thank you for holding this important hearing.

I also want to thank Father Firas (FUR-ahs) for coming all the way from the Holy Land to provide testimony. He will be discussing the plight of Palestinian Christians living in Aboud.

Over the course of the past three years, I have become increasingly engaged in the challenges facing Christian institutions and their communities in the Holy Land. The more I learn, the more I realize how central their situation is to the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The plight and security of Christians in the Holy Land is complex and nuanced. There are historical, current and future obstacles that threaten the survival of their community. A community not able to survive in the land of its origin would be a historical injustice. We must do all we can to preserve the indigenous Christian community in the Holy Land.

My concerns have emphasized the current reality that this dwindling community faces. Ignoring the present challenges only adds fuel to the fire and accelerates the arrival of long-term concerns that are more difficult to resolve. I conveyed these concerns in a letter to then-Secretary Powell in 2004 and more recently to President Bush this past month. Through articulating these concerns I do not wish to imply ill will toward either Israel or the Palestinians. My only intent is to report the facts and to see how the United States Government can help to improve the situation without compromising Israel's legitimate security concerns or religious freedom in Israel and Palestine.

Palestinian Christians are increasingly finding themselves caught in the middle of a bipolar situation between Islamic and Jewish extremism. It is this divide that is undermining the pluralistic character of Palestinian society. The implications of this reality have strategic implications on U.S. national security interests. If the heart of moderate and secular elements in Israeli and Palestinian societies is weakened, it will derail the implementation of President Bush's vision of two states living side by side in peace and security. The Middle East conflict is more towering than ever before. Perhaps, we should consider setting aside past strategies that have not accomplished this bold vision and find new ways to strengthen the peacemakers? One way to do this is to reduce the sources of extremism and strengthen a dialogue among religions as a bridge to peace.

Jerusalem is a universal city sacred to the three monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The coexistence of the core narratives of the three monotheistic religions is not only what makes Jerusalem unique, but is also the foundation of the stability of the city, if not the entire region. Maintaining the Holy City's indigenous and multicultural identity is critical to preserving the declining pluralistic nature of the Holy Land's many fabrics.

The Department of State's *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom* documents the destabilizing impact which the construction of the separation barrier in Jerusalem is having on its inhabitants. Local Christians view the barrier as something that is seriously damaging religious freedom in the Holy Land, impeding their access to important holy sites, and tearing at the social fabric of Christian life by destroying the important linkages between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. According to the State Department report, the barrier blocks the annual procession on Palm Sunday from Bethpage into Jerusalem in commemoration of when Jesus began his triumphant entry into Jerusalem.

I have been unable to understand how the currently routed barrier in Jerusalem – which rips asunder the existential poles of Christian belief, the Nativity and the Resurrection and encloses 200,000 Palestinians on the Jerusalem side of the barrier – will improve the security of Israel's citizens. The fact that the barrier is to be lined with settlements discloses political goals

irreversible in nature. These developments conflict with President Bush's repeated statements that the barrier being erected by Israel should be a security rather than a political barrier.

The rapid decline of Jerusalem's Inter-religious narrative jeopardizes strategic American interest in the city and values shared by Americans of all faiths. Establishing physical embodiments of extremism at the volcanic core of the Middle East conflict – precisely at a time when Islamic fundamentalism is on the rise – threatens to transform a resolvable, negotiable territorial conflict into a religious war with global implications.

For so long, Jerusalem has been viewed as a political obstacle to peace. I would like to suggest that the opposite is true. Jerusalem is the key to preserving religious pluralism in the Holy Land. The political problems of the city are a microcosm of the broader conflict. Its repercussions are exported and felt throughout the world. If measures are taken to protect its religious and cultural diversity, the struggle to assert her identity will end, resulting in a peace that will reverberate throughout humanity.

If this goal is not achieved, I fear that important holy sites will become museums for commercial purposes and will no longer be maintained as places of spiritual worship shared by billions across the world.

U.S. leadership is vital to safeguarding the integrity of the Holy Land and all its inhabitants.